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The Raven Miscellany

SIR WALTER SCOTT

BY

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SIR WALTER SCOTT

NO," said the lady in the bus—she had to speak rather loud to make herself heard above the din of the traffic—"No, I used to like Scott as a child, but I never read him now." "I don't suppose one could," replied her cultivated companion. But only 115 years ago, schoolboys risked a birching, young ladies neglected their harps, old gentlemen left their glasses of madeira half full, crabbed, bright eyed William Hazlitt forgot his hatred of Toryism—to finish *Waverley*.

Truly of all our novelists it is Scott whose reputation has undergone the greatest vicissitudes. Admired in his own day as no English novelist has ever been admired, his only regular readers nowadays are schoolboys who study his works under compulsion and without pleasure, as a holiday task. Now and again an old-fashioned supporter will praise him for his healthy tone; a moral rather than a literary virtue. But among

serious critics his reputation has slipped silently away till even Mr. E. M. Forster, acute, sensitive Mr. E. M. Forster can state that he was no more than a glorified writer of child's books, devoid of that quality of serious passion which is the mark of a great writer. It is largely Scott's own fault. But it is his readers' misfortune. For his contemporaries were in the right. He is a very great novelist indeed: and so far from not being serious, touched depths and heights often that most English novelists could never touch at all. But his merits do not lie open for every eye to see, especially the sort of eye with which people are taught to regard novels nowadays. One must learn how to appreciate him.

Of course to do this one must realise his range. A novel is a work of art in so far as it has an independent, individual life of its own—in so far as it is a world. And this independent life is begotten by the writer's creative imagination on his experience. But in any one writer there is only a certain proportion of this experience that can be so fertilised, only a certain proportion of what he sees and feels and knows that strikes deep enough into the fundamental of his personality to fire his

imagination to work. The proportion varies with the individual artist. With some it is small. Henry James rings the changes on one or two characters, one or two motives, one or two situations. On the other hand, there is hardly an aspect of his own life or of anyone else's, that did not come as grist to Tolstoy's mill. But whether it be big or small, only that particular part of his experience that fires the writer's imagination will be any use to him as artist. His artistic achievement must lie within its four corners; it is his range.

To realise this range, therefore, is the first thing we must do when estimating a writer. If we do not know what he can do how can we tell if he is doing it? This might seem obvious. But critics do not appear to think it so. They are always writing articles scolding Mr. Aldous Huxley because his books have not the exuberant spirits of Dickens, or taking Sir James Barrie to task because his picture of life lacks that fine, frank outlook on sex problems which they find so admirable a characteristic of Mr. D. H. Lawrence. But themes entailing exuberant enjoyment do not set Mr. Huxley's imagination to work,

nor do sexual problems inspire Sir James Barrie's. If they did write about these topics as likely as not they would fail. For they would be outside their range. And to blame a writer for failing to write outside his range, is as beside the point (as to blame a sculptor because his work is colourless.)

What is Scott's range then? It is all that part of experience which concerns man as a product of his local environment and his historic past. Every great novelist is primarily a portrayer of human character; but whereas Fielding say, paints man in his relation to his fellow men and Dostoievski in his relation to God, Scott paints him in relation to the circumstances and traditions, political, social, religious, natural of the society in which he lives. As Balzac points out, it is Scott's chief and splendid claim to originality that he was the first writer to bring these considerations into the novel at all. The novelists of the 18th century, the positive, unmystical 18th century, represent character as a detached phenomenon, owing nothing to its surroundings. Parson Adams, Doctor Primrose, Uncle Toby, are presented to us as cut flowers, their outlines

sharp, their colours vivid against the white, brightly-lit walls of the botanist's laboratory. We are told nothing of their natural background, the garden where they grew, the weather in which they blossomed; their historic and religious and social environment, and how it made them what they were. Parson Adams is a clergyman and an Englishman; but these facts tell us nothing significant about him. For the aspects of his character, with which Fielding is concerned, are not those which he has acquired from the world he has lived in; but the individual idiosyncrasies which differentiate him from it. He could be turned into a Catholic Irish priest and we should still recognise him.

Now to Scott such a view of character was impossible. His distinguishing characteristic was a sense of the past. It determined his whole attitude to life; no other novelist has ever had it to anything like the same degree. And thus, though he too had an acute appreciation of the individual, he always envisaged him in relation to his historic past: as a social animal shaped and coloured by those vaster, more impersonal forces of historic condition and trend which had shaped

and coloured the community of which he was a member. Every man he met he saw as a focus of these forces; betraying willy-nilly by word and act and prejudice, by his every trick of speech and gesture, the nation and place and creed and tradition which had moulded him to what he was.

Compare Parson Adams with a typical Scott figure like Edie Ochiltree. They have a great deal in common; both distinguished representatives of the same tradition—that great English tradition of the semi-humorous “character part” that extends from Dame Quickly to Kipps; made living to us by its actions, its individual idiosyncrasies of speech and habit, rather than by direct diagnosis or analysis. But Edie Ochiltree has not been uprooted from the garden where he grew; he does not appear before us against the uncoloured background of a laboratory wall. Round him swirl the mists of the Scotch lowlands which are his home, to his right rises the meeting-house of that Presbyterian church where he learned his creed, to his left the grim castle of Glenallan whose serfs were his forefathers, from his shoulders falls the blue gown of that ancient Scottish order of beggars of whom he is so

majestic an example; while faintly from the hills behind him echoes a snatch of those ancient folk ballads which have given its peculiar twist and tint to his imagination. To alter his circumstances, to turn him into an Irish Catholic beggar, would be to make him an unrecognisably different person. Scott looked on a man as an antiquarian looks at a house; to whom here a square of grey stone, there a brick gable, here again a fragment of sumptuous carving reveals Norman foundations, rebuilding in Tudor times a room redecorated under Queen Anne.

As a matter of fact Scott would have looked on an old house like this too. The elaborate landscapes and interiors that fill his books are described in terms of the past. A dimple in the down marks the track where the moss troopers rode down from the hills, a broken stone half hidden by heather shows where stood a wrecked Cistercian abbey; how rusty that old sword glints against the panelling—it has not been taken down since it was hung there after the battle of Culloden, sixty years since. Man and nature alike are to Scott first of all expressions of their history. This is his range.

Limited range of interest implies limited choice of subject. And Scott's range of interest confines his creative achievement to certain aspects of human life; those which peculiarly illustrate its connection with the past. All his great characters are the children of small communities, close corporations, remote localities, age-old traditions, the sharp angles cut by whose influence have been unmodified by contact with the great changing, impersonal, cosmopolitan world; Evan Dhu, the Highlander, Dandy Dinmont, the Cumberland farmer, Davie Deans, the old Covenanter, Wandering Willie, the beggar minstrel. Many of the most memorable are beggars and poor people; for, spending their life as they do, in a small area, unable to learn much about other people and ideas from books, they are especially the creatures of their historic environment. "I have chosen my personages," says Scott, in his introduction to *The Antiquary*, "from the class of society which are the last to feel the influence of that general polish which assimilates to each other the manners of different nations."

In the same way his range of interest determines his themes. The conflicts on which his

plots turn are not as with most novelists, between two individual temperaments; but between an individual temperament and a tradition; or sometimes between the representative of one tradition and another. Jeanie Deans is torn between love of her sister and the strict commands of the covenanting faith in which she has been educated, Elspeth of the Craighburnfoot between loyalty to the Glenallan family and her desire to make reparation for a crime committed in their service, Ravenswood between his love for Lucy and his inherited feud with her family; Meg Merrilies is compelled by her conscience to restore the wrongfully deposed heir of Ellan-gowan to his inheritance; Harry Wake and Robin Oig are forced into mortal and unwilling combat by the conflicting conceptions of honour instilled into them by national tradition. And the emotions which fire the books are the emotions single, epic, common to mankind, which such conflicts engender; love of home and country, pride in ancient institutions, regret for their passing, awe and superstitious terror stirred by the sense of the past still at work in our own lives, hatred kindled by an ancient wrong, loyalty

to creed or kindred or the fortunes of a fallen king.

Finally Scott's choice of subject is limited by a third and different consideration. No serious novelist writes well about worlds he has not lived in. He gets distracted by the superficial aspects of its inhabitants, he cannot get sufficiently under their skins to light the spark of life there. Fearful and wonderful are the results when Dickens leaves the lower and middle classes he knew so well to share in the gilded revels of Sir Mulberry Hawk; or when George Eliot turns her conscientious Victorian British hand to the sins and splendours of 15th century Florence. But what is true of George Eliot and Dickens, is far truer of Scott. For his chief interest in character lies precisely in those fine distinctions of social and national character which an outsider can never understand. All Scott's best books, *Waverley*, *Guy Mannering*, *The Antiquary*, *The Heart of Midlothian*, *Red Gauntlet*, *Old Mortality*, *The Bride of Lammermoor*, take place in Scotland and its borders; and all happen within that hundred or so odd years of his birth covered by the memory of someone he might have known.

Such is Scott's range. And there is no denying that it has striking limitations. Apart from anything else it leaves out all that vast, varied area of human activity and interest we call private life; all man's preoccupations as an individual, pursuing his individual happiness, his personal hopes, fears and problems and pleasures and weaknesses and aspirations. And with these, except in so far as they come into contact with the claims of the wider forces of history and environment, go his relations to other people, to parents, children, friends, above all to the other sex. This last is possibly the chief cause why people do not think Scott is a serious novelist. The sexual relation is the most personal thing in the world; exclusively a private affair between two people; stirring the same reactions, undergoing the same vicissitudes in all countries, in all centuries, when Rome is falling or Chicago rising. It is obviously no subject for Scott. But it involves after all the primary passion of human nature: and any picture of life which gives little account of it, will seem to the average man and still more to the average woman rather unreal. So that the average man and still more the average

woman tend to start with the idea that Scott is no more than a superior writer of fanciful adventure stories.

His range of characters is limited too. A great many people's lives are purely private lives, revolving round their own jobs, their own families, their own love affairs. A writer who does not describe private life will not be able to describe them. The average well-to-do young man or woman who is the hero and heroine of nine novels out of ten is like this; Scott's range does not include the hero and heroine of the average novel.

Again only a limited proportion of types vividly illustrate the historic past. Some of the most interesting do nothing of the kind. Philosophers do not, for instance, and artists; their significant characteristic is to be found in the line they strike out for themselves, their independence of environment, not their connection with it. Scott's great figures include no Levines and Bazarofs and Roderick Hudsons. Nor for that matter any Becky Sharps or Milly Theales or Saint Loups; any cosmopolitans or adventurers or men of the world. There is no doubt if you

come to Scott expecting the sort of thing you find in Thackeray or Proust or Henry James you will be disappointed.

But you will find a great deal else. With all his limitations Scott's range is not a narrow one. And it takes in some ground that Thackeray and Proust, and the rest of them never approach. That of the adventure story, for instance. Scott is not primarily a writer of adventure stories. But his themes, involving as they do conflicts between primitive characters in remote surroundings, entail that violent action, conspiracy, fight, escape of which the adventure story is made. And with the adventurous incidents go the adventurous emotions; suspense, the heart high in the face of danger; the thrill felt when the knee is tense against the saddle girth, the sword-hilt rough in the hand; the gambler's exhilaration when all is staked on a chance and man's wits at their sharpest.

On another side Scott's range extends to include ground usually thought peculiar to poetry. Man's relation to historic environment is a dry-sounding phrase, but it means romance; all that vast area of romance that is associated with time

and place, the romance of ancient tales, of picturesque distant places, of buildings marked with the traces of man's history, of those wild places of the earth on which man, for all his history has left no trace at all. It means all the emotions stirred in us by association, personal or historic, by a relic hallowed by connection with home or hero, by a stave of old song, a place loved in childhood, by any of the thousand frail unbreakable ties of sentiment that bind us to the past. These emotions it is, that at their most intense, give us a sense of the supernatural. We feel there must be some living power, working from the dead past or resident in inanimate matter, that they should affect us so strongly. And Scott's range includes the supernatural. His books are full of spectres and second sight and tutelary spirits; the omens that gather like monstrous birds of prey round the dying fortunes of the Ravenswood family, the bizarre, fateful dreams that mingle with fitful firelight and wind-stirred tapestry to torment the sleep of Lovell on his first night at Monkbarns, the unholy mirror of Damiootti, the sorcerer, the Bodach Ghas foe of his house even beyond death that confronts

Fergus McIvor shadowy and relentless on the evening before his last battle.

Finally Scott's range extends to a higher sphere of poetry—to the tragic. This is rare in fiction. For tragedy, the most tremendous expression of the literary art, aiming as it does at penetrating to the fundamental strata of man's nature, exhibiting his ultimate capacities for good or evil, joy or sorrow, is only possible under two conditions. The characters with which it deals must be of a stature to exhibit these extreme capacities, and the situation in which they are involved must be big enough to call them forth. Othello is the pattern tragedy, because his hero and heroine are people of the highest virtue and emotional capacity, involved, by a character of sublime wickedness in a situation so catastrophic that its issue can only be death. Now most novelists have been concerned to portray the world they saw around them. And this world, Europe of the 19th and 20th centuries, has with the exception of the semi-barbarous country of Russia, achieved a degree of civilisation in which spectacular crimes and catastrophes are confined to the criminal, degraded section of the community.

You do not find figures of tragic stature there. It would be incredible nowadays that a heroic soldier like Othello and a flower of innocent sweetness like Desdemona should be the protagonists in a story of bloodthirsty jealousy culminating in murder. Nor, fortunately, is the average criminal a prince of the powers of darkness like Iago. So that modern novelists have had very little tragic material at their disposal. Of course there are exceptions. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is a true tragedy: for its heroine is a noble character involved, partly by her very nobility, in a terrible ruin. But *Tess's* are few and far between. Most modern tragedies are not true tragedies for they are not about tragic characters. Mr. Dreiser's *American Tragedy*, for example, is not a true tragedy—though it is certainly American—for the motives of his actors are so trivial, their natures so ignoble, that the emotion stirred in the reader is not tragic awe at man's powers, but pitying disgust at his futility. But Scott is in a very different position; his themes impose on him no such handicap. The struggle between rival loyalties, between loyalty and personal feeling, implacable revenge for an ancient wrong

pursued through life, unavailing remorse for an ancient crime—these subjects both involve violent and catastrophic action and also some of man's highest motives and intensest passions. They are the essential stuff of which tragedy is made: not so much the complex tragedy of Shakespeare and the great dramatists, but the simpler heroic tragedy of epic and saga and ballad.

Indeed Scott's subject matter is rather that of epic, saga and ballad than it is that of the typical novel. The authors of *The Song of Roland*, *The Tale of the Volsungs*, *Chevy Chase* do not concern themselves with private life. They write of loyalty and patriotism and the obligations of honour, of legends and heroes, of ghostly premonitions and the romance of the sword. This is their range as it is Scott's; it is this we must expect to find when we open his books. It is surely enough to find in any single novelist.

And he was peculiarly equipped to do justice to it. Like his range his genius has its limitations. The fabric of its expression is very loosely woven: its detail perfunctory and conventional. While his carelessness and inequality are remarkable even among the careless unequal writers of Eng-

land. But he is built on the grand scale. His powerful, negligent grasp can control huge masses of heterogeneous material; if he sometimes does easy things badly, he often does difficult things well; and what he does well he does with ease. He has incomparable force and breadth and flexibility and resource. Nor do his carelessness, his conventionality spoil his effects. His personality assimilates them, his vitality surmounts them. With his broad brush he paints on, never stopping to correct a mistake, smudging in any stock formula of stormy sky or fluttering curtain for background: but the result has certainty and energy and solidness which makes the work of more careful craftsmen look as lifeless as a waxwork.

He had his special gifts too. For one thing he can tell a story. This is an advantage to any novelist; but to Henry James, let us say, not a pre-eminent advantage. For not more than a third of a Henry James novel is story; the rest is analysis and description. At least three-fifths of a Scott novel, on the other hand, is story. If that is dull and confused three-fifths of the book is dull and confused. It cannot be said that Scott is

never dull. His story-telling is as unequal as everything else about him. The action is often very long getting under way; for whole pages the unfortunate reader of *The Monastery* lies becalmed on an ocean of topographical description and historical reminiscence with not the skimpiest sail of a plot in sight. But no one can begin a book better, if he tries, than Scott; the first chapter of *Guy Mannering*, with its lonely rider lost on the unfriendly moor at nightfall; or the panorama of 18th century Edinburgh, tavern and dark alley murmurous with discontent and threat of bloodshed, which introduces us to the Heart of Midlothian; or the quieter but not less effective opening of *Rob Roy*, bitter decorous dispute over the fireside, and Mr. Osbaldistone, that magnificent, Raeburn figure, with his energetic countenance and his contemptuous manner—how these stimulate the curiosity and compel the attention and set the imagination aflame. And it is rare if it is not still burning on the last page. It hardly matters if the fuel is intractable, wooden characters, improbable incidents, lengthy periods of inaction. Scott can get more tension out of a face at the window than most novelists

out of twenty hair-breadth escapes, more of the thrill of combat out of a pistol in the saddle bag than most modern writers out of all the high explosives that kept the world quiet on the Western front. Rob Roy's interview with Baillie Nicholl Jarvie in the Tolbooth consists of nothing but fourteen pages of semi-humorous conversation. Yet *Monte Cristo* itself contains no scene more exciting; until the final moment when Rob has disappeared into the shadows of the Edinburgh street we are on tenterhooks. Nor is this effect produced by any Kiplingesque sleight of hand in the telling; cunningly worked-up climax, artfully omitted inessentials. Scott proceeds as straight forward and leisurely, with as little fear of digression and expansion as Scharazad herself. Indeed his art is the art of Scharazad. He is not so much one of the first of novelists as the last representative of the old lost art of story-telling.

Closely associated with his narrative gift is his pictorial: his power to make the reader visualise the scene he is describing. This too is particularly useful for his purpose. The novel of action, unlike the novel of analysis, is made up of such scenes; its crises are always visible events. Scott

is better able to make us see them than any other English novelist except Hardy. His method is not at all like Hardy's. No more than Kipling's narrative dexterity has he Hardy's power to make a scene vivid by an arresting, unusual image; the road across Egdon Heath "like the parting in a head of black hair," the ceiling stained with Alec D'Urberville's blood, "like a great ace of hearts." Scott's similes are conventional, his epithets vague and commonplace; he would most likely have said that "the road showed white against the sombre verdure of the moor," described the ceiling as "stained with a ghastly and sanguinary red." Yet he makes us see his scenes as clearly as Hardy does.

"The scene, independent of the peculiar moral interest and personal danger which attended it, had, from the effect of the light and shade on the uncommon objects which it exhibited, an appearance emphatically dismal. The light in the fire-grate was the dark-red glare of charcoal in a state of ignition, relieved from time to time by a transient flame of a more vivid or duskier light, as the fuel with which Dirk Hatteraick fed his fire was better or worse fitted for his purpose. Now a dark cloud of stifling smoke rose up to the roof of the cavern and then lighted into a reluctant and sullen blaze, which flashed wavering up the pillar of smoke, and was suddenly rendered brighter and more

lively by some drier fuel, or perhaps some splintered fir-timber, which at once converted the smoke into flame. By such fitful irradiation, they could see, more or less distinctly, the form of Hatteraick, whose savage and rugged cast of features, now rendered yet more ferocious by the circumstances of his situation, and the deep gloom of his mind, assorted well with the rugged and broken vault, which rose in a rude arch over and around him. The form of Meg Merrilies, which stalked about him, sometimes in the light, sometimes partially obscured in the smoke and darkness, contrasted strongly with the sitting figure of Hatteraick as he bent over the flame, and from his stationary posture was constantly visible to the spectator, while that of the female flitted around, appearing and disappearing like a spectre."

"Dark cloud," "rugged rock" figure "like a spectre" are not these the clichés of description worn threadbare in a thousand novels? Yet what words could be more visualising? Scott himself has seen the scene he is describing; and as we listen to him we see it. By the sheer strength and certainty of his imaginative vision he has galvanised the well-worn phrases into fresh and vivid life. The cliché has become the *mot juste*.

To recall his books is to recall a gallery of such pictures: Waverley crouching in the dark on the edge of the English camp, the firelight on the

sentries' regimentals glinting through the furze; Sir Arthur Wardour and Douster-swivel shrinking panic-stricken on the moon-chequered pavement of the ruined abbey; Wandering Willie with his dog and his doxy found making music that sunny, windy day in a sheltered nook of the links of Solway.

Scott's set descriptions of landscape and interior are less effective. Apart from anything else they are much too long. And here we do feel the need of more precise phrase, more arresting detail. It needs the movement of human beings to bring the stock formulas to life. Immobile and uninhabited these "pleasant slopes" and "awful prospects" and "richly-decorated apartments" are altogether too vague to call up any clear picture before the mind's eye. Even here, though, Scott will now and again startle the reader by a splendid success. How magnificently vivid is the description of the sunset before the great storm in *The Antiquary*:

"The sun was now resting his huge disk upon the edge of the level ocean, and gilded the accumulation of towering clouds through which he had travelled the livelong day, and which now assembled on all

sides, like misfortunes and disasters around a sinking empire, and falling monarch. Still, however, his dying splendour gave a sombre magnificence to the massive congregation of vapours, forming out of their unsubstantial gloom, the show of pyramids and towers, some touched with gold, some with purple, some with a hue of deep and daring red. The distant sea, stretched beneath this varied and gorgeous canopy lay almost portentously still, reflecting back the dazzling and level beams of the descending luminary, and the splendid colouring of the clouds amidst which he was setting. Nearer to the beach, the tide rippled onward in waves of sparkling silver, that imperceptibly, yet rapidly, gained upon the sand."

Here the formal, generalised diction is a positive gain; it invests the whole scene with a sort of ominous majesty exquisitely in tone with the situation. Nor is our attention diverted from the object described as it sometimes is in the descriptions of more brilliant writers like Stevenson, by admiration for the apt epithets and original similes used to describe it.

But the novelist stands or falls not by description and narrative—alone these two powers can do no more than mildly entertain us—but always and only by his power to create character. Now

Scott's talent for character-drawing is of a piece with the rest of his talents, simple and straightforward without strangeness or subtlety. He does not explore the obscurities of human motive like George Eliot or of human consciousness like Proust. We look in vain in his great figures for those minute revealing strokes of nature that vitalise the characters of Tolstoy or Jane Austen. But though simple, he is not superficial. He draws the broad, essential outlines of character with unsurpassed clearness and force: and he has the novelist's first virtue, the mysterious, irreplaceable power of making it live.

And all sorts of characters. His range had its limitations as we have seen; but within those limitations it would seem inexhaustible. Scott's living people come from the north country, they do not come from the highest society. But these are their only common attributes. They cannot be grouped into categories. We do not find them reappearing in different books under different names as we do Thackeray's or Hardy's. Sturdy Dandy Dinmont, respectable, adventurous Baillie Jarvie, Andrew Fairservice, with his eye to the main chance and his strict religious views, long-

winded, short-tempered, kindly Jonathan Old buck, Glossin with his sly eyes, Dumbie Dike that silent lover, good-natured, hot-tempered Bucklaw, the ghastly figure of Elspeth of the Craighburnfoot hag-ridden by memory of incest and murder, the two Headriggs, Dalgetty, Bal four of Burley, Meg Merrilies, Sandy Muckle backit; these are only a few of the hundred that crowd upon the memory face upon face in endless vista; all different and all living.

In his actual method of presenting them he is not an innovator. His great figures are all, like Edie Ochiltree, in the tradition of character that dominates English letters from Fielding to Dickens. Scott had learnt his trade in their school; and though he revealed human nature against a new background he saw no reason to depart from their instruction in his actual method of depicting it. Like his masters he drew man clear as print, solid as a brick, with every individual characteristic emphasised to the point of caricature. The mists may swirl round their heads, the castle and crag rise sublime at their backs, the characters themselves are the matter-of-fact, beef-faced descendants of Roderick Random and Tom Jones.

Like those of Fielding and Dickens and Smollett his great characters have all a grotesque, and most a comic side. His comedy is less edged and terse and sparkling than theirs, more like that of Hardy or of the Shakespeare that was their common master, the Shakespeare who created Shallow and Silence and Juliet's nurse; a massive, leisurely, genial, shrewd humour, the humour of the countryman close-woven with traditional tale and homely racy saw and rural illustration. Frank Osbaldistone interrupts Fairservice, the Presbyterian gardener, struck with fear by the sight of the dark figures of the Jacobite agents lurking at night in the Hall garden:

"As I approached the mansion of the sapient Andrew, I heard a noise, which being of a nature peculiarly solemn, nasal, and prolonged, led me to think that Andrew, according to the decent and meritorious custom of his countrymen, had assembled some of his neighbours to join in family exercise, as he called evening devotion. . . . The noise, however, when I listened to it more accurately, seemed to proceed entirely from the lungs of the said Andrew; and when I interrupted it by entering the house, I found Fairservice alone, combating, as he best could with long words and hard names, and reading aloud, for the purpose of his own edification, a volume of controversial divinity. 'I was just taking a spell,' said he, laying aside the huge folio volume as I entered, 'of the worthy Doctor Lightfoot.'

“ ‘Lightfoot!’ I replied, looking at the ponderous volume with some surprise; ‘surely your author was unhappily named.’

“ ‘Lightfoot was his name, sir; a divine he was and another kind of a divine than they hae now-a-days. Always, I crave your pardon for keeping ye standing at the door, but having been mistrysting (gude preserve us!) with ae bogle the night already, I was dubious o’ opening the yett till I had gaen through the o’ening worship; and I had just finished the fifth chapter of Nehemiah—if that winna gar keep their distance, I wotna what will.’

“ ‘Trysted with a bogle,’ said I; ‘what do you mean by that, Andrew?’

“ ‘I said mistrysted,’ replied Andrew; ‘that is as muckle as to say, fley’d wi’ a ghaist—gude preserve us say I again.’

“ ‘Flay’d by a ghost, Andrew! how am I to understand that?’

“ ‘I did not say flay’d,’ replied Andrew, ‘but fley’d, that is, I got a gleg, and was ready to jump out o’ my skin, though naebody offered to whirl it aff my body as a man wad bark a tree.’ ”

But, and here he divides sharply from Dickens and Fielding and the rest of them, his humorous characters are seldom exclusively humorous. Parson Adams, Mrs. Gamp, Commodore Truncheon, are always presented on the plane of comedy. They may achieve a moment of pathos; but it is impossible to think of them, either as

tragic or poetical themselves or as assisting at a tragic or poetic scene. They would be as out of place in it as harlequin in Hamlet; and must either subdue their personality altogether or strike a painfully false note. They are not constructed to breathe except in their own comedy air. Scott's similar characters are not so limited. Edie Ochiltree enters the scene as much a comic character as any of them, the sly beggar mocking the antiquary; but within a few chapters we have seen him confronting violent death, meditating fancifully on the scent of the wall-flower sweet on the warm night air, rebuking two duellists in the high strain of a Hebrew prophet. Nor does his personality alter with his situation. Scott's grasp on the essentials of character has a Shakespearean firmness that allows him to shift a figure through every vicissitude of mood and circumstance without letting fall a particle of its individuality.

Now such power over character is rare enough in any novelist, but it is especially rare in one who writes about the sort of subjects Scott does. If they are interested in man's relation to environment they tend to subordinate the man to the environment. Peasant life in Ireland, let us say,

interests them; they wish to give a picture of it; almost always they use the individual characters as mere pegs on which to hang the picture. And novelists of the romantic are just the same. Their imagination has been caught by the romantic atmosphere of Nordic Saga, for example; they wish to paint a picture that shall recapture it. And they, also, tend to use the characters as mere pegs to hang their picture on. The consequence for both sorts of author is, that their figures are not individuals at all, but just stock types; the Irish peasant all brogue and blarney, the Saga hero all war-cry and winged helmet. So that as novels, as creations of new worlds of living people, their books are failures.

Not so Scott. He is dominated by his interest in the past. But the past is interesting to him primarily in so far as it elucidates the individual. He begins with the character, not with the environment or the atmosphere. He is interested in meeting-house and castle and ballad for the light they shed on Edie Ochiltree, not in Edie Ochiltree for the light he shed on castle, ballad and meeting-house. And in consequence we too think of Edie Ochiltree first of all as an indivi-

dual. And the fact that he is drawn in the English tradition, the clear, solid, individualistic English tradition, makes us believe it all the more.

It is here that we come to the secret of Scott's unique, peculiar greatness, the key to his puzzle, the figure in his carpet. That he can create living characters is enough to make him a great novelist. It is the apparently incongruous combination between his type of character and his type of theme that makes him different from other great novelists. He combines the substance of the realist with the fantasy of the romantic: he had a foot in two worlds and made the best of both of them.

Scott's characters are not more vital than Fielding's but they touch life at many more points, reveal many more aspects of experience. On the other hand he gives the remote and the picturesque a substance not to be found in any other English novelist. We realise the influence of their surroundings on the people of the Lowlands all the more keenly when we accept them as living individuals not typical figures invented by the sociologist to illustrate his point; adventures are much more thrilling when we feel they

are happening to real people in real danger, not just to the jack-booted puppets of a boy's Christmas gift book. Scott recovers the ballad spirit far more convincingly than most writers who have tried to do so; because like the original ballad authors, he is first of all concerned with the story and the characters, and not just to create a romantic atmosphere. Above all because he writes about real people, he is able to take advantage of his opportunities for tragedy.

For he does take advantage of them. With Hardy and Emily Brontë he is our only tragic novelist. Alone but for them, he is of a stature to walk easily in a world of high action and high passion. But tragedy beyond all other forms must convince the reader that it speaks of real people. And since Scott is most real when he is dealing with his 18th century, prosaic, semi-humorous "character parts" it is through these that he makes his tragic effects. He has his more conventional, tragic types, Ravenswood, Glenallan; but they are not so real and therefore not so effective. It is with Meg Merrilies and Elspeth of the Craighburnfoot and the Deans family, with gipsies and farmers and fisher-folk drawn in his

most concrete 18th century manner that Scott commands the demons of pity and terror.

And Scott's tragedy is not less tragic from its association with such characters. On the contrary it is more tragic. It is a principal difficulty confronting the novelist of tragic situation, to avoid letting the situation dominate the characters. Overshadowed by their tremendous circumstances, they tend to lose their human stature to shrink to puppets without will of their own with which to struggle against destiny. Yet if they are will-less puppets, their struggle loses all its tragic tension. Even Hardy sometimes fails to prevent this happening. But Scott's peculiar method of drawing character makes it impossible. His figures are too firmly rooted in every day fact for it to be doubted, for a moment, that they are flesh and blood men and women with wills of their own. Their four-square solidity only gives an added force of reality to their stories. Besides, the motives of Scott's characters are so remote from our own day, their circumstances so different, that unless the characters are made very realistic and prosaic and modern we should not believe in them at all. This is startlingly apparent in the trial scene from *Waverley*.

“Fergus, as the Presiding Judge was putting on the fatal cap of judgment, placed his own bonnet upon his head, regarded him with a steadfast and stern look, and replied in a firm voice, ‘I cannot let this numerous audience suppose that to such an appeal I have no answer to make. But what I have to say, you would not bear to hear, for my defence would be your condemnation. Proceed, then, in the name of God, to do what is permitted to you. Yesterday, and the day before, you have condemned loyal and honourable blood to be poured forth like water. Spare not mine. Were that of all my ancestors in my veins, I would have peril’d it in this quarrel.’ ”

“Evan Maccombich looked at him with great earnestness, and, rising up, seemed anxious to speak; but the confusion of the court, and the perplexity arising from thinking in a language different from that in which he was to express himself, kept him silent. There was a murmur of compassion among the spectators, from the idea that the poor fellow intended to plead the influence of his superior as an excuse for his crime.

“ ‘I was only ganging to say, my lord,’ said Evan, in what he meant to be an insinuating manner, ‘that if your excellent honour, and the honourable Court, would let Vich Ian Vohr go free just this once, and let him gae back to France, and no to trouble King George’s government again, that ony six o’ the very best of his clan will be willing to be justified in his stead; and if you’ll just let me gae down to Glennaquoich, I’ll fetch them up to ye mysell, to head or hang, and you may begin wi’ me the very first man.’ ”

“Notwithstanding the solemnity of the occasion, a sort of laugh was heard in the court at the extraordinary nature of the proposal. The Judge checked this indecency, and Evan, looking sternly around, when the murmur abated, ‘If the Saxon gentlemen are laughing,’ he said, ‘because a poor man, such as me, thinks my life, or the life of six of my degree, is worth that of Vich Ian Vohr, it’s like enough they may be very right; but if they laugh because they think I would not keep my word, and come back to redeem him, I can tell them they ken neither the heart of a Hielandman, nor the honour of a gentleman.’

“There was no farther inclination to laugh among the audience, and a dead silence ensued.”

It needs a great effort of the sympathetic imagination for anyone living in 1933 genuinely to enter into the feelings of an 18th century Highland chieftain about to die for the cause of legitimacy: nor does Fergus’ rotund eloquence make it any easier. We feel we are listening to an actor in a romantic melodrama; not to a real man in real danger of death. Evan’s sentiments, his savage clansman’s loyalty is even further from our experience. But he is one of Scott’s realistic characters. And the moment he begins to speak the atmosphere changes. We are listening to a living man, there is no doubt about that now;

and the fact that his sentiments and circumstances are so unlike anything we have known only gives his words an added and terrific poignancy. In such passages that union of imaginative theme and realistic method which is the secret of Scott's glory, achieves its highest triumph. As no other novelist can, not Conrad or Kipling or Stevenson, he can treat the heroic: make it living and solid and contemporary and yet retain an epic simplicity and dignity.

These great effects are got by simple means. Scott was no analyst: he exhibits his characters solely by speech and action. And here we come to the last of his peculiar talents; his mastery of vernacular dialogue.

Taken as a whole he is not one of the stylist novelists. He has a style; every paragraph he writes has that individual flavour which marks it as Scott's. His narrative, too, moves with that elastic, story-teller's gusto he imparts to everything he touches: and at moments, in the superb last pages of *The Bride of Lammermoor* for instance, it rises to a formal relentless majesty which is tremendously impressive. But no one would read one of his books—as they might

read *The House of Seven Gables*—for the style alone. His narrative writing is marked by all his customary inequality and carelessness. It never fits the sense like a glove; it has no felicity of phrase, no melodious, inevitable cadence. And the dialogue of his educated characters is much the same as his narrative. It is capable of a fine dignity and expressiveness on occasion, and on an exacting occasion: when Ravenswood confronts Lucy Ashton with her breach of faith for instance, or Claverhouse proclaims his contempt of death to Henry Morton. But as often it is commonplace and wordy. And if Scott is treading on ground that makes him nervous, a proposal of marriage, or a conversation between two young ladies of good family, he falls into a sort of agonised embarrassed gentleman's stiltedness which is highly comic.

But as usual when he is dealing with the less highly born he is very different. Not that his vernacular dialogue is subtle or elaborate. He is the father of all that long array of writers who have explored the literary possibilities of patois. But he did not pursue his explorations as far as his children; the talk of his peasants is not thick-

sown with flowers of speech like those of Synge for instance; his images are simple, his allusions not recondite. However this is not to his disadvantage; on the contrary it is half his glory. For it means that his dialogue never fails as Synge's sometimes does to perform its primary function; it is always subordinate to its speaker. Here once more Scott keeps his feet firmly fixed in both his worlds. We always feel his words to be the words of real men; and in consequence the beauty of them comes upon us with all the more effect.

For—and this is the second half of his glory—they are beautiful. Scott's vernacular dialogue is style in its highest sense; every image apt, every cadence exact to follow the modulation of the speaker's mood, yet never unmusical. He has achieved that rarest of literary triumphs a form of speech which sounds perfectly natural and which is yet as expressive as poetry.

Even its common change has a poetic lilt and precision.

“ ‘Now lass, if ye like,’ says crazed Madge Wildfire, ‘we’ll play them a fine jink; we will awa out and take a walk—they will make unco wark when they miss us, but we can easily be back by dinner

time, or before dark night at ony rate, and it will be some frolic and fresh air.' "

But of course it is the deeper feelings that give his form a chance fully to reveal its capacities. As the emotion rises so does the diction of the actors assume a proportionate intensity and elevation. Sometimes it bursts forth in a torrent of tragic eloquence. How magnificent are Meg Merrilies' tirades; whether she curses those who turned her and tribe homeless into the wilderness:

" 'Ride your ways,' said the gipsy, 'ride your ways, Laird of Ellangowan—ride your ways, Godfrey Bertram! This day have ye quenched seven smoking hearths—see if the fire in your ain parlour burn the blyther for that. Ye have riven the thack off seven cottar houses—look if your ain roof-tree stand the faster.—Ye may stable your stirks in the shealings at Derncleugh—see that the hare does not couch on the hearthstane at Ellangowan.—Ride your ways, Godfrey Bertram—what do ye glower after our folk for?—There's thirty hearts there, that wad hae wanted bread ere ye had wanted sunkets, and spent their lifeblood ere ye had scratched your finger. Yes—there's thirty yonder, from the auld wife of an hundred to the babe that was born last week, that ye have turned out o' their bits o' bields, to sleep with the tod and the black-cock in the muirs! Ride your ways. Ellangowan.—Our bairns are hingin at our weary backs—look that your braw cradle at

hame be the fairer spread up—not that I am wishing ill to little Harry, or to the babe that's yet to be born—God forbid—and make them kind to the poor, and better folk than their father!—And now, ride e'en your ways; for these are the last words ye'll ever hear Meg Merrilies speak, and this is the last reise that I'll ever cut in the bonny woods of Ellangowan.' ”

—or, in gentler mood bids a last farewell to that sequestered grove where she has spent some of the few quiet hours of her stormy life.

“She then moved up the brook until she came to the ruined hamlet, where, pausing with a look of peculiar and softened interest before one of the gables which was still standing, she said in a tone less abrupt, though as solemn as before, ‘Do you see that blackit and broken end of a sheeling?—there my kettle boiled for forty years—there I bore twelve buirdly sons and daughters—where are they now?—where are the leaves that were on that auld ash-tree at Martinmas!—the west wind has made it bare—and I’m stripped too.—Do you see that saugh-tree?—it’s but a blackened rotten stump now—I’ve sate under it mony a bonnie summer afternoon, when it hung its gay garlands ower the poppling water.—I’ve sat there, and,’ elevating her voice, ‘I’ve held you on my knee, Henry Bertram, and sung ye sangs of the auld barons and their bloody wars—It will ne’er be green again, and Meg Merrilies will never sing sangs mair, be they blithe or sad. But ye’ll no forget her, and ye’ll gar big up the auld wa’s for her sake?—and let

somebody live there that's ower gude to fear them of another warld — For if ever the dead came back amang the living, I'll be seen in this glen mony a night after these crazed banes are in the mould.' "

In the mouths of the wild witch doctors of the Covenant it forgets its homely origin and phrase and assumes a wild biblical tone.

" ' Who talks of signs and wonders? Am I not Habakkuk Mucklewrath, whose name is changed to Magor-Missabib, because I am made a terror unto myself and unto all that are around me?—I heard it— When did I hear it?— Was it not in the Tower of the Bass, that overhangeth the wide wild sea?—And it howled in the winds, and it roared in the billows, and it screamed, and it whistled, and it clanged, with the screams and the clang and the whistle of the sea-birds, as they floated, and flew, and dropped, and dived, on the bosom of the waters. I saw it—Where did I see it? Was it not from the high peaks of Dumbarton, when I looked westward upon the fertile land, and northward on the wild Highland hills; when the clouds gathered and the tempest came, and the lightnings of heaven flashed in sheets as wide as the banners of an host?— What did I see?—Dead corpses and wounded horses, the rushing together of battle, and garments rolled in blood.— What heard I?—The voice that cried, Slay, slay—smite—slay utterly—let not your eye have pity! slay utterly, old and young, the maiden, the child, and the woman whose head is grey—Defile the house and fill the courts with the slain!' "

Not less stirring though more restrained is the rhetoric of Jeanie Deans pleading with Queen Caroline for her sister's life.

“ ‘If it like you, madam,’ said Jeanie, ‘I would hae gaen to the end of the earth to save the life of John Porteous, or any other unhappy man in his condition; but I might lawfully doubt how far I am called upon to be the avenger of his blood, though it may become the civil magistrate to do so. He is dead and gane to his place, and they that have slain him must answer for their ain act. But my sister—my puir sister Effie, still lives, though her days and hours are numbered! She still lives, and a word of the King’s mouth might restore her to a broken-hearted auld man, that never, in his daily and nightly exercise forgot to pray that his Majesty might be blessed with a long and a prosperous reign, and that his throne, and the throne of his posterity might be established in righteousness. O, madam, if ever ye kend what it was to sorrow for and with a sinning and a suffering creature, whose mind is sae tossed that she can be neither ca’d fit to live or die, have some compassion on our misery!—Save an honest house from dishonour and an unhappy girl, not eighteen years of age, from an early and dreadful death! Alas! it is not when we sleep soft and awake merrily ourselves that we think on other people’s sufferings. Our hearts are waxed light within us then, and we are for righting our ain wrangs and fighting our ain battles. But when the hour of trouble comes to the mind or to the body—and seldom may it visit your Laddyship—and when the hour of death comes, that comes to high and low—

lang and late may it be yours—O my Leddy, then it isna what we hae dune for oursellis, but what we hae dune for others, that we think on maist pleasantly. And the thoughts that ye hae intervened to spare the puir thing's life will be sweeter in that hour, come when it may, than if a word of your mouth could hang the haill Porteous mob at the tail of ae tow.' "

But the opportunity for these tirades does not come very often. More generally Scott lets the note of tragic eloquence steal into his dialogue, imperceptibly and unexpectedly, as the throb of emotion steals into a voice. Edie Ochiltree, caught between cliff and racing tide, turns and faces death.

" 'I hae lived to be weary of life,' he cries, 'and here or yonder—at the back o' a dyke in a wreath o' snaw, or in the wame o' a wave what signifies how the auld gaberlunzie dies?' "

Crouched in the bleak churchyard Dame Gourlay and her horrible fellow witches watch Lucy Ashton led frozen and beautiful to her hated bridal.

" 'D'ye see yon dandilly maiden,' said Dame Gourlay, 'a' glistering wi' goud and jewels, that they are lifting up on the white horse behind that bare-brained callant in scarlet, wi' the lang sword at his side?'

“ ‘But that’s the bride!’ said her companion, her cold heart touched with some sort of compassion; ‘that’s the very bride herself! Eh, whow! sae young sae braw, and sae bonny, and is her time sae short?’

“ ‘I tell ye,’ said the sibyl, ‘her winding sheet is up as high as her throat already, believe it wha list. Her sand has but a few grains to rin out, and nae wonder—they’ve been weel shaken. The leaves are withering fast on the trees, but she’ll never see the Martinmas wind gar them dance in swirls like the fairy rings.’ ”

Effie Deans waiting death in prison turns to her Bible.

“ ‘See,’ she said, ‘the book opens aye at the place o’ itself. O see Jeanie, what a fearfu’ scripture!’ . . . ‘He bath stripped me of my glory, and taken the crown from my head. He bath destroyed me on every side, and I am gone. And mine hope bath he removed like a tree.’ ‘Isna that ower true a doctrine?’ said the prisoner—‘Isna my crown, my honour removed? And what am I but a poor wasted wan-thriven tree, dug up by the roots, and flung to waste in the highway that man and beast may tread it under foot? I thought o’ the bonny bit thorn that our father rooted out o’ the yard last May, when it had a’ the flush o’ blossoms on it, and then it lay in the court till the beasts had trod them a’ to pieces wi’ their feet. I little thought, when I was wae for the bit silly green bush and its flowers, that I was to gang the same gate mysell.’ ”

Elsbeth of the Craighburnfoot, worn down by

seventy years tortured and unavailing brooding over the guilty past, breaks out in uncontrollable lamentation.

“ ‘If I hae sinned, hae I not suffered?—Hae I had a day’s peace or an hour’s rest since these lang wet locks of hair first lay upon my pillow at Craighburnfoot?—Has not my home been burned wi’ my bairn in the cradle?—Have not my boats been wrecked, when a’ others weathered the gale?—Have not a’ that were near and dear to me dree’d penance for my sin?—Has not the fire had it’s share o’ them—the winds had their part?—And oh!’ she added with a lengthened groan, looking first upward towards heaven, and then bending her eyes on the floor—‘Oh that the earth would take her part that’s been lang lang wearying to be joined to it.’ ”

Scott’s finest strokes in this kind are shorter even than these; chance remarks, two or three words thrown off at the height of tragic tension. Listen once more to the beggar on the sea-shore. The sea is gaining; beside himself with terror Sir Arthur Wardour implores him to think of a way of escape.

“ ‘Can you think of nothing—no help—I will make you rich—I will give you a farm—I’ll’—‘Our riches will soon be equal,’ said the beggar, looking out across the strife of the waters.”

Robin Oig unwillingly and irresistably com-

pelled, as he feels, by the first requirement of honour, has killed his best friend

"he threw the fatal weapon into the blazing turf fire. 'There,' he said, 'take me who likes—and let fire cleanse blood if it can.'"

Elspeth of the Craighburnfoot is seated at the wake of her young grandson, so old that no one can make out if she realises the occasion or no. According to the Scotch custom wine is handed round.

"Elspeth, as these refreshments were presented surprised and startled the whole company by motioning to the person who bore them to stop; then, taking a glass in her hand she rose up, and, as the smile of dotage played upon her shrivelled features, she pronounced, with a hollow and tremulous voice, 'Wishing a' your healths, sirs, and often may we hae such merry meetings!'"

Meg Merrilies, hurrying silently to the assignation that shall finally achieve the vengeance which for over twenty years has been her only pre-occupation, stops at a clearing in the wood where, as she alone knows, the first of the guilty to suffer, already lies buried.

"She paused an instant beneath the tall rock and stamped upon the ground, which notwithstanding all the care that had been taken,

showed vestiges of having been recently moved. 'Here rests ane,' she said, 'he'll maybe hae neibors sune.' "

These last sentences are not to be quoted; for their force lies in their relation to what has gone before. Yet it is impossible adequately to praise Scott without quoting them. For in them Scott's union of realism and imagination shows itself at its most concentrated. They are real with the unexpected inevitability of an actual event; it is as if the characters had for a moment become independent of their creator and were speaking of their own volition. But their words are touched by the imagination, to stir sublimer echoes. Their understated irony seems, as by a sort of divination, to reveal the situation in its more tremendous relation to the indifferent decrees of nature and destiny. They strike across the scene "like flashes of lightning discovering the perils of travellers among the Alps."

The quotation is from Raleigh on Shakespeare. And with reason; for it is of the English tragic drama rather than of the English novel that Scott's tragic eloquence reminds us. In real life people are not able to express their deeper feel-

ings adequately. And most novelists have made their characters as inarticulate as they would be in life. "Oh God!" they cry, at moments of crisis, "no"—"don't"—"you hurt me too much," endeavouring by these distraught monosyllables to convey the storms of fear and woe raging in their hearts. It is the peculiar art of the tragic poet to translate these incoherent feelings into adequate words. And, though he is careful to maintain the illusion of natural speech, so is it also the peculiar art of Scott. As he is one of the few tragic novelists, so from his solid 18th century characters we hear what we hear from no others save those in *Wuthering Heights*, the authentic voice of tragic poetry.

Tragic poetry, vivid pictures, epic emotion, living people, the best of realistic and romantic—here certainly is ground enough for Scott's contemporary reputation. Only—one wonders—why has he lost it? Why are people not reading him as much as they read Dickens or Jane Austen? Alas, his spectacular merits are counter-balanced by equally spectacular defects. All his qualities are the creative qualities, the qualities of art. And the creative qualities, though they are

the first essential to a great writer, are not the only ones necessary to his complete success. They ensure that the material he is writing about shall be the true stuff of which art is made. But in order that this material should be presented to its full advantage he needs the critical qualities, the qualities of craft. And these he possessed as little as any writer who has ever lived.

The period in which he wrote was, of course, not one that exacted a high standard of craft in the novel. But Scott would have been a bad craftsman in any period. He neither understood the laws governing the novel in general, nor the particular capacities and limitations of his own genius in particular. And besides, laziness or modesty or exuberance or all three together had made him careless. "Style," he is reported to have said, to an admirer who asked him about the principles which guided the practice of this branch of his art, "Style—I never think about style. I have had regiments of cavalry marching through my head ever since I was fourteen."

It is a charming answer. But it revealed an attitude well-nigh disastrous to him. The goddess of art is not thus gaily to be mocked. Scott's

words meant to begin with, that he was liable to fall into the most fatal error that besets the path of the creative artist; to write outside his range. If only a certain range of his experience has the power to stimulate a writer's imagination, it is clear that he should stay within it. The faultless craftsmen—Turgenev, Jane Austen, always do—and the consequence is they practically never make a failure. There are a great many things that they cannot write about; but they do not write about them, so it does not matter. Within their limits they are consistently successful. Scott, ignorant of his talent and therefore of his range, imposed no deliberate limits on his subject matter. With the result that a great deal of his work was just wasted.

He spent a great deal of time, for instance, in writing whole books of which he could never have made a success—stories about distant periods of the world's history, the age of Richard I or Louis XI, or 16th century Germany. One can quite understand why he did. These periods appealed to his imagination, ever sensitive to the charm of the past. He longed to reconstruct them. But to reconstruct a living world not from

one's own experience, but only from what one has read about it in the records of other people's experience, is pretty well impossible. The very fact that its picturesqueness appeals to you shows that you do not see it as its inhabitants did. And if you do not see it as its inhabitants did, how can you reconstruct it as it really looked? And, as a matter of fact, with a few freak exceptions, there are no conscientiously accurate historical novels that convey the effect of a living world in the sense that *Anna Karenina* or *Middlemarch* do. The novels about past periods that do give an effect of life, *The Three Musketeers* or *The Scarlet Letter*, are not serious reconstructions at all; but fantasies and romances set in the past because the author felt that a modern realistic setting was incongruous to their spirit. But Scott is not a fantastic writer. He was interested in the past, because of the light it threw on real men living in the world of fact. His range of reality was, as we have seen, the country of his birth as it appeared within the memory of living people. And, in consequence, though, like everything he wrote, they have vivid scenes and a fine narrative gusto, as serious novels *Ivanhoe* and the rest of them are failures.

It would not have mattered so much, if he had only written outside his range in a certain specified type of novel. But he is equally liable to do it anywhere. His limitations are not only of place or period, but of character and theme; and even if he is writing of Scotland in the 18th or 19th centuries he often trespasses on alien ground.

It is partly due to the second major defect in which his critical incapacity involved him, his lack of sense of form. A sense of form is the craftsman's first virtue. It means the power to understand the true nature of one's inspiration; and as a result to construct a fitting frame through which to express it. Now in the first place Scott did not conceive a novel as a whole at all. His books did not make that first appearance in his mind, as they did in that of Henry James, as unities of which the various episodes and characters were to emerge later and gradually, as contributory elements. No, as he said, they marched in like regiments, brilliant, disorderly, uncontrolled regiments of people and incidents. And he then imposed an artificial unity on them by means of a plot put together for the purpose: sometimes thought out carefully, sometimes just made up as he went along.

This in itself would prevent his books moving with that inevitability which characterises the works of masters of form: For the plot has no organic connection with the novel's inspiration. Scott was inspired to write *The Antiquary*, as he himself tells us, by his vision of the tragic possibilities inherent in Scottish peasant life and speech. But the plot turns on something quite different, on the matrimonial projects of the gentlemanly Lovel. This does not make for aesthetic unity. Moreover, Lovel's story does not make a very interesting plot. Indeed plots invented merely to serve as pegs and not for their own intrinsic interest seldom are interesting. And Scott's for the most part are just perfunctory reshapes of the conventional novel-plot of his day, with a hero and a heroine and an intrigue, hastily rounded off with a marriage.

The first fatal result of this was that he was involved in writing on all sorts of subjects outside his range, high life, characters needing a complex analysis to make them clear, above all, sex; with its inevitable corollary, the romantic heroine. There is hardly one of the *Waverley* novels in which we do not groan to find forcibly

imprisoned there by the plot a lifeless bundle of perfections called the heroine—Rose Bradwardine, Julia Mannering, Rowena, Lucy Ashton, Isabella Wardour, or whatever her particular name may be. “Very nice young ladies,” as Admiral Croft said of the Miss Musgroves, “I hardly know one from the other.” If for once Scott does attempt to endow a heroine with a little more individuality, the moment that she is called upon to perform her function and take part in a love scene, she turns to sawdust and copy-book sentiment. Diana Vernon is a charming, spirited sketch on her first appearance, bright-eyed and wilful-haired galloping over the Cheviots. But listen to her refusing a proposal of marriage. “This is folly, this is madness. Hear me, sir; and curb this unmanly burst of passion. . . . To me these raptures are misapplied—they only serve to prove a further necessity for your departure and that without delay.” Only in Jeanie Deans has Scott found a heroine whose station and situation give full scope to his talents.

Nor are the general run of Scott’s heroes much better than the heroines; impeccable, incredible, indistinguishable young men—Frank Osbaldi-

stone, Henry Morton, Lovel—what evil spirit has conjured you from the hairdresser's window which is your true home? No need to ask. The answer is only too plain: the plot, the wretched, exigent, conventional plot.

It is responsible for other defects as well. One of the first rules of the novel is that the emphasis of form should fall in the same place as the emphasis of interest, that the characters and episodes where the author's imagination is burning brightest shall be the most important characters and episodes in the plot. But since Scott has imagined them separately, as often as not the contrary happens. The emphasis of the plot is, as it were, always pulling against the emphasis of the interest. The most memorable characters are minor characters, the most thrilling incidents irrelevant to the main theme. These human characters, living as those of Fielding, are elbowed out of their natural place of pre-eminence by puppets whose names we forget as we shut the book; these scenes vivid as Hardy's, tragic moments equal to Emily Brontë's, have to fit themselves in as minor episodes. We remember Old Mortality for Cuddie Headrigg and Balfour of

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Burley; but the action turns on Morton and Edith Bellenden. Who thinks of Julia Manning and Harry Bertram when they recall the story of Meg Merrilies and Dandy Dinmont? I know myself as a child and Scott the only classic author I had read, I took for granted that the interesting characters in a novel were subsidiary characters. I could hardly believe my eyes when I turned to *Jane Eyre* and found that in the works of some eccentric authors they were the hero and heroine.

And as the result of this dual emphasis Scott, except in a few unrepresentative cases like the *Bride of Lammermoor*, is cut off from the use of all those important weapons of the story-teller that come from the right incident occurring in the right place; varied tension, telling highlight, gradually accumulated emotion, climax. He is indeed an expert in anti-climax. The most exciting incidents may occur at the beginning of the book; the catastrophe to which the whole plot leads up, be as flat as a pancake. Scott springs his most thrilling scenes upon us, his most brilliant descriptions, highest flights of tragic eloquence, anywhere and without preparation; if

they make their effect it is by sheer intrinsic imaginative force, against the grain of the story. He is like an athlete who jumps without taking any run beforehand. His agility is so great that he often succeeds; but sometimes he does not. And anyway if he had taken a run he would not have needed to make such an effort.

Finally his lack of form means that his work has no proper proportion. In *Waverley*, for example, he takes sixteen of the forty-two chapters in getting started; it is as if we advanced up a huge flight of steps only to find a small building at the top. In *The Heart of Midlothian*, on the other hand, he goes on for a whole volume after the story is over. Indeed he never knows when to stop. And as often as not he will linger the longest over his dullest and most uninspired passages. It may be because they are necessary to the plot; as for instance that vast cumbrous machinery of intrigue that clutters up the first half of *Rob Roy*. But sometimes they have not even that excuse. They are just padding. And the worst of padding is that besides being dull in itself it weakens the force of the good passages concealed within it. The mind, dulled by the

effort to attend to what wearies it, will not respond to what should be its delight. With Elizabethan merits Scott has the faults of the Elizabethans. Like them, he buries his jewels of humour and beauty beneath piles of slipshod and conventionality.

The consequence of all this is that Scott's genius never found its true fulfilment. He is the most variously gifted of all English novelists. He is the father of all historical novelists, all the novelists who concern themselves with local characters, all romancers; he is one of the greatest masters of the English humorist tradition: he is almost the only English novelist who inherits also that great lost tradition of English tragic poetry. But he never wrote a single consistently successful novel.

Even if he manages to avoid one of his usual errors it is only to fall into another. 'The Bride of Lammermoor', for example, has, for once, an excellent and well-constructed plot. And with what overpowering effect does it move to its awful culmination! But the central action turns on love—and passionate love at that. It needed a sentiment of fiery strength to over-ride the in-

herited enmity between Ravenswood and the Ashtons. Scott makes it as tame as the loves of the plants. And in consequence the book, magnificent as it is, leaves us feeling as though we had listened to a piece of music in which an important note in the scale had not been sounded. *Red Gauntlet* and *The Antiquary*, on the other hand, do keep pretty well within Scott's range; in them the sentimental interest, though not expelled, is driven into a small corner. But their plots are very dull and very complicated; and neither has any organic unity at all. Indeed *The Antiquary* changes the centre of its interest halfway through the book. 'The Heart of Midlothian is marred by an unnecessary last volume, *Rob Roy* by a peculiarly tedious intrigue, *Old Mortality* by a streak of the artificial costume novel, the "tushery" of *Ivanhoe* and *The Talisman*. Perhaps *Guy Mannering* is the most successful, as a whole. It opens splendidly and culminates in a most thrilling climax. But it, too, is full of unnecessary incidents and wooden characters; while the correspondence between the two young ladies is surely the most unconvincing attempt of female impersonation with

which even Scott has ever seen fit to regale his readers; it shows up against the breathing vividness of the peasant and gipsy scenes as lifeless and lustreless as a wax flower in a herbaceous border. Except in his briefest flights, Wandering Willie's tale and the wonderful little story of The Two Drovers, Scott has never managed to maintain a consistent perfection. And he has been punished for it. His treasures of poetry and passion lie as often as not unrecognised in their dull museum of amorphous and conventional romance. It may be that in consequence his full-length novels, even the best of them, will never again find readers, except among those who are prepared to delve and sift.

Yet those who are so prepared, will never close these books dissatisfied. For in spite of all their faults, their merits are of so unique, so majestic a kind; sufficient in themselves to place Scott almost alone of English writers in the narrow aristocracy of the world's novelists. Ben Jonson said of Donne that he was the first poet in the world *in some things*; so we may say of Scott that he was the first novelist in the world *in some things*. And even round his worst work hovers the hint of a careless greatness.

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